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SUBJECT: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS VIEWS ON ECONOMIC REFORM: ENJOYING THE
SUNSHINE

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Students at two of China's most prestigious universities said they are optimistic about China's economic growth prospects and feel fortunate to be graduating from college during this period in China's development. While they remain concerned about finding a good job after graduation, they believe China's economy currently provides many opportunities to earn a comfortable living. As a result of China's rapid economic development, students are electing to pursue business opportunities rather than careers in government or academia, and they said they are less interested in social reform than in taking advantage of China's economic boom. END SUMMARY.

WHITE HOUSE FELLOWS VISIT TO CHINA

¶2. (SBU) A delegation of 12 White House Fellows visited China May 19-26 with stops in Xian and Beijing. The visit covered a wide range of issues but focused primarily on economic development. The White House Fellows exchanged views on China's economic reforms with university students at Jiaotong University in Xian on May 22 and Tsinghua University in Beijing on May 25.

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TWO OF CHINA'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS UNIVERSITIES

¶3. (SBU) Xian Jiaotong University was founded in 1896 and is considered Western China's top university. The university has more than 20,000 undergraduates in 76 degree programs, and more than 20 students from the Departments of Economics, Finance, Management, Foreign Languages, and International Studies participated in the May 22 discussion. Tsinghua University in Beijing is widely considered to be China's best university. Graduate students from the School of Public Policy and Management provided their views on economic reform on May 25.

COLLEGE: THE BEST OF TIMES...

¶4. (SBU) Students in both Xian and Beijing said they consider their generation to be very lucky to graduate during this period of China's history. The students are optimistic about China's economic growth prospects and said they enjoy more opportunities than their parents. A Tsinghua student said that she does not worry about a

lack of opportunities but rather is concerned with which ones she should take. A student at Jiaotong University said he is particularly encouraged by increasing economic cooperation between China and other countries, including the United States, and he hopes to study abroad to gain a global perspective.

15. (SBU) Tsinghua graduate students told the White House Fellows that China's robust economic growth has influenced their dreams for the future. The students said they previously wanted to earn PhDs and become professors or researchers, possibly become scientists and win a Nobel Prize, or perhaps become government officials. But now, the students said, they are focusing on getting their Master's Degrees and finding high-paying jobs in the private sector so that they can buy a car and a house, get married, and "enjoy the sunshine."

...THE WORST OF TIMES

16. (SBU) Like students throughout China, however, the students we met at Jiaotong and Tsinghua remain concerned about job prospects given that there are more university graduates than white collar jobs. The students at the two schools said they rest easier because they attend prestigious universities. Without a strong degree, they said, students cannot guarantee their future. (Note: According to official statistics, 4.13 million students graduated from Chinese universities in 2006, and 4.75 million are projected to graduate in 2007. Since the Central Government launched a policy in 2001 to increase university enrollment, the number of students has increased more than fourfold, and despite China's rapid economic growth, the number of jobs that tap university-level skills has not kept pace. End Note.)

17. (SBU) Students also expressed concern about China's growing rich-poor gap. At Xian Jiaotong University, located in Western China, one student asked the White House Fellows for possible

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solutions to address economic imbalances. At Tsinghua, one student said he is worried about Western China's incomplete social insurance system and the growing gap with the coast. When it involves their own lives, however, two Tsinghua students from Western China (Chongqing Municipality and Guizhou Province) said they are not planning to return home to work but would prefer to remain in Beijing after graduation.

VIEWS ON POLITICAL AND SOCIAL REFORM

18. (SBU) Not surprisingly, students from two of China's most prestigious universities supported the status quo when asked about political and social reform. One student at Jiaotong University said the Communist Party is ruling the country effectively as demonstrated by improving living standards. Students said the Party remains the primary economic growth engine, and China lacks philanthropic organizations or other civil society organizations engaged in community service. Blogging on the internet provides an outlet for some frustrations, they said, but a few blogs do not accurately represent the reform views of all students.

19. (SBU) The students uniformly said they are more interested in business than in social reform. They asked the White House Fellows whether real estate is a good investment option and said they prefer finding a good business internship to joining a political or social organization. One student at Jiaotong University summed up the views of his classmates by stating that he is involved in only two activities outside the classroom: playing basketball and playing the stock market.

COMMENT: A REFLECTION OF CURRENT ECONOMIC REALITIES

110. (SBU) The views of these students reflect current economic realities in China as a plethora of business opportunities await eager graduates from elite schools like Tsinghua and Jiaotong. While these students may defend the status quo on political and

social issues, it is also conceivable, and even expected, for their views to change over time, but it is difficult to predict how their opinions might change. As these students made clear, the pace of economic development and the opportunities it presents for them in the coming years will influence their outlook on political and social reform in China.

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